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UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 ABU DHABI 004359

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STATE FOR DRL, NEA/ARP, NEA/PI, NEA/PPD

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SUBJECT: Candidates Nominated as UAE Prepares for First Election

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Ref:

- (A) 05 Abu Dhabi 4919 (Limited poll prelude to direct vote)
- (B) Abu Dhabi 3904
- (C) Abu Dhabi 3463 (Education reform reshaping civics)
- (D) Abu Dhabi 2655 (Elections/participation, not democracy)

¶1. (U) Summary: The period during which the 6,000 plus members of the Federal National Council (FNC) "Electoral College" can be nominated to compete for one of 20 vacant seats has closed. Although nominations began slowly, the final list exceeded 450 candidates and included 65 women. UAE President Khalifa emphasized in a press interview that this limited election is only the first step toward greater political participation, but offered no timeline for direct elections. End summary.

FNC Candidates Chosen

¶2. (U) The UAE National Election Commission (NEC) announced that 456 candidates have been nominated (from among the 6,689-member "Electoral College") to compete for the 20 FNC seats to be filled during December elections. The final list of names will be announced November 30, prior to which time some press reports speculate that many names may be withdrawn by the candidates themselves or due to challenges/objections by other members of the Electoral College.

¶3. (U) According to the preliminary nominee list, 14% percent of all candidates are women (65) with the emirate of Sharjah having the most candidates (101) and highest percentage of women (29), while the emirates of Umm Al Quwain and Fujairah each had only one female candidate out of 29 and 37 candidates respectively. The numbers of candidates nominated from each emirate are:

-- Abu Dhabi - 100 (14 women) competing for 4 seats;
-- Dubai - 82 (15 women) competing for 4 seats;
-- Sharjah - 101 (29 women) competing for 3 seats;
-- Ras Al-Khaimah - 83 (3 women) competing for 3 seats;
-- Ajman - 24 (2 women), competing for 2 seats;
-- Umm Al Quwain 29 (one woman), competing for 2 seats; and
-- Fujairah - 37 (one woman), competing for 2 seats.

¶4. (U) A cursory review of the nominees reveals several instances where wives, husbands, brothers, or fathers are competing against one another. Nominees appear to be fairly representative of the electoral body itself and include business leaders, educators, government officials, social workers (especially women), and previous FNC members. The Arabic daily Al-Khaleej reported November 24 that the Dubai Police Commander who was planning to compete for the Speaker's position, decided not to run after he was asked for a "certificate of good conduct" (objecting that anyone would question his conduct after years of public service). In a separate report, a UAE University professor questioned the qualifications of many candidates, noting that elements of candidates' stated election platforms are "weak" and demonstrate little knowledge of either the

constitution or the FNC.

¶15. (U) In an interview carried by the official Emirates News Agency (WAM), Dr. Anwar Mohamed Ghargash, Minister of State for FNC Affairs, publicly announced that the UAEG does not and will not support any particular candidate. He stated that after elections are completed, the rulers of each emirate will use their discretion in appointing the remaining half of the FNC membership from either inside or outside the "Electoral College" membership. He added that citizens' interest in the elections is demonstrated by the fact that an information call center set up by the NEC received over five thousand inquiries since its launch in September.

President Khalifa: Enabling Citizens Toward Greater Participation

¶16. (U) In a November 20 interview by London-based Al-Sharq Al Awsat, President Sheikh Khalifa bin Zayed Al-Nahyan spoke broadly about political and social changes taking place in the UAE, focusing on the upcoming elections of the Federal National Council (FNC) in December. Khalifa described the limited elections of the FNC as the beginning of "the enabling era," a distinct shift in both policy and purpose from the previous "foundation era" presided over by the late President Sheikh Zayed bin Sultan Al-Nahyan. Khalifa explained that the primary goal of this "enabling" period is to lay the groundwork for the emergence of a more active UAE citizenry. He further stated that the first step is to increase the political experience of the FNC and make it more representative.

¶17. (U) President Khalifa said his vision of democracy in the UAE aspires to create a condition where the traditional values of participation and Shura (consultation) are accentuated and the FNC is enabled to bear its responsibility as a legislative body that supports social change. Khalifa repeatedly referred to membership on the FNC in terms of "loyalty." He stated that representatives should have "undisputed allegiance to their homeland," and that FNC membership is a matter of "loyalty and responsibility."

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¶18. (U) Khalifa acknowledged that limited elections of FNC members this December are a small step toward democratization and defended the pace of change stating that "there is no need for rushing that may lead one to stumble." He stated that gradual steps in elections are an extension of a philosophy seeking to provide the "right environment" for greater change, eventually leading to a fully representative electoral process. When pressed for a timeline for the next stage, Khalifa responded by saying, "This is not a transition governed by the passing of time." Khalifa emphasized that he does not consider parliamentary elections as the sole element of a democratic system. He stated that "democracy consists of a package of practices" that include freedom of speech, and laws that guarantee political, social, and human rights (ref C).

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